Sundiata Keita

Sundiata Keita (Mandinka, Malinke, Bambara: [sʊndʒæta keɪta]) (c. 1217 – c. 1255[8]) (also known as **Manding Diara**, **Lion of Mali**, **Sogolon Djata**, son of Sogolon, **Nare Maghan** and **Sogo Sogo Simbon Salaba**) was a puissant prince and founder of the Mali Empire. The famous Malian ruler Mansa Musa, who made a pilgrimage to Mecca, was his great-nephew.[9][10]

Written sources augment the Mande oral histories, with the Moroccan traveller Muhammad ibn Battúta (1304–1368) and the Tunisian historian Abu Zayd 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun al-Hadrami (1332–1406) both having travelled to Mali in the century after Sundiata's death, and providing independent verification of his existence. The semi-historical but legendary *Epic of Sundiata* by the Malinké/Maninka people centers on his life. The epic poem is primarily known through oral tradition, transmitted by generations of Maninka griots (*djeli* or *jeliw*).[11]

Mansa Sundiata Keita	
Emperor of Imperial Mali	
Reign	c. 1235 – c. 1255[1]
Coronation	Crowned Mansa after The Battle of Kirina: c. 1235
Predecessor	Naré Maghann Konaté and Dankaran Touman both as *Faamas* (*Kings* in Mandinka language – pre-Imperial Mali. As a Mansa (King of Kings), preceded by none).
Heir-apparent	Mansa Uli I
Born	c. 1217[2] Niani, part of present-day Guinea
Issue	Mansa Wali Keita Mansa Ouati Keita Mansa Khalifa Keita Mansa Sundiata Keita also had daughters not just sons.
Full name	
Mansa Sundiata Keita	
House	The Royal House of Keita
Father	Naré Maghann Konaté
Mother	Sogolon Condé
Religion	Some say Traditional African religion[3][4][5] others claim Muslim[6][7]

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Epic of Sundiata

The oral traditions relating to Sundiata Keita were passed down generation after generation by the local griots (*djeli* or *jeliw*), until eventually their stories were put into writing. Sundiata was the son of Naré Maghann Konaté (variation: *Maghan Konfara*) and Sogolon Condé (variations: "Sogolon Kolonkan" or "Sogolon Kédjou", the daughter of the *"buffalo woman"*, so called because of her ugliness and hunchback).[14] Sundiata was crippled from childhood and his mother (Sogolon) was the subject of ridicule among her co-wives. She was constantly teased and ridiculed openly for her son's disability. This significantly affected Sundiata and he was determined to do everything he possibly could in order to walk like his peers. Through this determination, he one day miraculously got up and walked. Among his peers, he became a leader. His paternal half-brother, Dankaran Touman, and Dankaran's mother, Sassouma Bereté, were cruel and resentful of Sundiata and his

A modern balafon. The balafon plays an important role in the Epic of Sundiata. The magical balafon belonging to Soumaoro Kanté was stolen by Sundiata Keita's griot - Balla Fasséké and taken to Mandinka country.[12][13]

mother. Their cruelty escalated after the death of Naré Maghann (the king and father of Sundiata). To escape persecution and threats on her son's life, Sogolon took her children, Sundiata and his sisters, into exile. This exile lasted for many years and took them to different countries within the Ghana Empire and eventually to Mema where the king of Mema granted them asylum. Sundiata was admired by the King of Mema for his courage and tenacity. As such, he was given a senior position within the kingdom. When King Soumaoro Kanté of Sosso conquered the Mandinka people, messengers were sent to go and look for Sogolon and her children, as Sundiata was destined to be a great leader according to prophecy. Upon finding him in Mema, they persuaded him to come back in order to liberate the Mandinkas and their homeland. On his return, he was accompanied by an army given to him by the King of Mema. The warlords of Mali at the time who were his age group included: Tabon Wana, Kamadia Kamara (or Kamadia Camara), Faony Condé, Siara Kuman Konaté and Tiramakhan Traore (many variations: "Trimaghan" or "Tiramaghan", future conqueror of Kaabu). It was on the plain of Siby (var: Sibi) where they formed a pact brotherhood in order to liberate their country and people from the powerful Sosso king. At The Battle of Kirina, Sundiata and his allies defeated the Sosso king and became the first Emperor of the Mali Empire. He was the first of the Mandinka line of kings to adopt the royal title *Mansa* (*king* or *emperor* in the Mandinka language).[15][16][17][18][19][20]

The Mandinka epic does not give us dates, but Arab and North African writers who visited the area about a century after the epic's events documented on paper some of the information, including dates and a genealogy. Conversely, the written sources left out other pieces of information that the oral tradition includes.[21]

- Sogolon Djata
- Sundjata Keyita
- Mari Djata or *"Mārī-Djāta"* (according to Ibn Khaldun in the late 14th century)[22]
- The Lion King[23]

The proper English spelling of Sundiata's name is **Sunjata**, pronounced *soon-jah-ta*, approaching the actual pronunciation in the original Mandinka. The name *Sogolon* derives from his mother and *Jata* means *lion.* It is the traditional way of praising someone in some West African societies (Gambia, Senegal, Mali and Guinea in particular). The name *Sundiata* praises him through his mother which means *"the lion of Sogolon"* or *"Sogolon's lion"*. The name *Jata* derives from *Jara* (lion). Jara and many of its variations such as *jata*, *jala* or *jada* are merely regional variations, from Gambia, Guinea or Mali, for instance. Sundiata's name is thus a derivation o his mother's name Songolon (*Son* or its variation *Sun*) and Jata (lion).[24][25]

Soumaoro Kante

Soumaoro Kante was the king of the Sosso people in the 13th-century and the antagonist to Djata, or Sundiata's, legacy as king of Mali. He, Soumaoro, was known as the sorcerer king, for he was adept in the magical arts, though he used them to propel his tyrannical schemes. With great magical ability, a mighty army of blacksmiths, and a dictator's character, any place under his rule despised him. He was especially known as a notoriously cruel leader, stealing wives and queens from their (royal) families, pillaging conquered territories, and killing anyone who opposed his rule. He would soon conquer nine kingdoms in the Ghana Empire before conquering the Mandinka people of Mali, Sundiata's home, and Balla Fasseke, Sundiata's lost griot. His crudeness was not spared in Mali either, and he ruled with an iron fist. Upon knowledge of Sundiata returning to Mali from his asylum in Mema, Soumaoro, too busy fighting off Fakoli, sent his son, Sosso Balla. Moreover, Sosso, who was around the same age as Sundiata, was to intercept and relinquish Sundiata's army before they reached Tabon, a pivotal location on Sundiata's journey to Mali. This was a grave mistake by Soumaoro, however, for Sundiata's force was much too overwhelming for Sosso Balla and his leadership, leading to their eventual destruction at the hands of Sundiata at this battle, almost killing Sosso Balla in the process. Sosso Balla, in shame for dishonoring his father with failure, came back in defeat to his father's dismay. Fakoli Koroma, who Soumaoro was busy fighting instead of Sundiata, was the insurgent nephew of Soumaoro, who rebelled against his uncle when Soumaoro took his wife. Moreover, this happened soon

after Sundiata and Soumaoro's first encounter in which Fakoli, Soumaoro's general at the time, defeated Sundiata. After all Fakoli did for Soumaoro, this angered him deeply and Fakoli soon fought against Soumaoro, eventually fighting side by side with Sundiata's forces against the common enemy, the sorcerer king. At the battle of Krina, Soumaoro was finally defeated by an enchanted arrow thrown from Sundiata, that is said to have weakened his magical shield, and an overwhelming military front by Sundiata's generals. Soumaoro did not die instantly from this arrow, but he would soon die hobbling to the insides of a cave.

Surname (Keita or Konaté?)

Some Bambaras and Mandinkas have proposed that the name *Keita* actually means *inheritor* (heir-apparent) in the Mandinka language, and that Sundiata's real surname is *Konaté* (French spelling in Mali) or *Konateh*, variations: Konate, Conateh (English spelling in the Gambia where the Mandinkas make up the largest ethnic group). It is proposed that Sundiata Keita's father, Naré Maghann Konaté, took the real family name *Konaté* while his successors were "Keitas in waiting" (heirs to the throne).[24] The name *Keita* is a clan name rather than a surname.[26] Although in some West African societies a clan can be similar to the family name (see Joof family), such similarities do not exist between the names *Keita* and *Konaté*. Both points of contention agree that Keita is not a real surname, but rather a royal name, in spite of the fact that Sundiata is referred to as Sundiata Keita in many scholarly works. At present, there is no consensus among the scholars regarding the name *Sundiata Konaté*.

Battle of Kirina

Terracotta archer figure from Mali (13th-15th century), with a quiver on his back. The bow and quiver of arrows were the symbols of power in Imperial Mali.[27]

Delafosse previously proposed that, Soumaoro Kanté's grandfather with the help of his army and the Sosso nobility of Kaniaga captured what was left of the sacked Ghana Empire, and by 1180, Diara Kanté (var: *Jara Kante*), Soumaoro's father gained control of Koumbi Saleh, dethroned a Muslim dynasty and continued the Diarisso Dynasty (variation: *Jariso* or *Jarisso*) whose son (Soumaoro) went on to succeed him and launched an offensive against the Mandinkas.[28][29] Delafosse's original work has been refuted and discarded by many scholars including Monteil, Cornevin, etc. There was no Diara Kanté in the oral sources. That was an addition by Delafosee which was contrary to the original sources.[30] The consensus is, in c. 1235, Sundiata who had survived one of Soumaoro's earlier raids went to war with the help of his allies against King Soumaoro of Sosso. Although a valiant warrior, Soumaoro was defeated at The Battle of Kirina (c. 1235).[31] Soumaoro is regarded as one of the true champions of the Traditional African religion. According to Fyle, Soumaoro was the inventor of the balafon and the *dan* (a four-string guitar used by the hunters and griots).[32] After his victory at Kirina, Sundiata took control of the former conquered states of the Sosso and appropriated privileges among those who participated in the defeat of Soumaoro. The former allies of Soumaoro were also later defeated, in particular the king of Jolof. Serer oral tradition speaks of a Serer king of Jolof, involved in the occult (just as Soumaoro), who was later defeated by Tiramakhan Traore (one of the generals of Sundiata) after Sundiata sent his men to buy horses in Jolof. It is reported that, when Sundiata sent his men to Jolof to buy horses in a caravan loaded with gold, the king of Jolof took all the gold and horses – known among some as "the robbery of the horses". In a revenge attack, Sundiata sent his general to Jolof to assassinate the king.[33] It is believed that, it was probably this king of Jolof (known as Mansa Jolofing or Jolofing Mansa) who sided with Soumaoro at The Battle of Kirina[34] and possibly belongs to the Ngom Dynasty of Jolof, the predecessors of the Diaw and Ndiaye Dynasties of Jolof.[35] At present, little is known about the Ngom Dynasty of Jolof.

Niane has advanced the claim that, the Jolofing Mansa sided with Sumaguru [or *Soumaoro*] because *"like him, he was hostile to Islam."* He went on to state that:

> "He *[the King of Jolof]* confiscated Diata's *[Sundiata's]* horses and sent him a skin, saying that he should make shoes out of it since he was neither a hunter nor a king worthy to mount a horse."[36]

Religion

Niane alludes to Sundiata being a Muslim. According to Fage, there is nothing in the original epos that supports the claim. Sundiata is regarded as a great hunter and magician whose subjects predominantly adhered to traditional beliefs, as did Sundiata.[3][4][5] Others claim that Sundiata most likely practiced a syncretic form of his ancestral religion, which had absorbed some Islamic concepts from their geographical proximity to their Muslim neighbors. According to these scholars, it was his descendants who officially converted to Islam, and it later became a religion associated with the nobility.[37][38]

Regardless, many of Sundiata's successors were Muslim, with Mansa Musa Keita being one of the most widely known.[39]

In the epic of Sundiata, Sundiata claims "an ancestral origin among the companions of Muhammad in Mecca" (namely, Bilal Ibn Rabah)[40] and speaks of himself as a successor to Dhu al-Qarnayn, a conqueror and king mentioned in the Quran, commonly regarded as a reference to Alexander the Great.[41] In exile, Sundiata learns about Islam when he travels to the city of the Cissés, and returns wearing Muslim robes. It is mentioned that there was "only one mosque" in Niani,[42] Sundiata's hometown, but we can also see the invocation of "Allah Almighty" by Sundiata's mother,[43] indicating that Islamic terms, at least, were known. Although it is unknown whether Sundiata was actually Muslim, it is clear that the epic of Sundiata was affected by what Ralph Austen calls "Islamicate" culture—that is, the integration of Islamic and Arab culture by inhabitants of the region, whether they are Muslim or not.[41]

Imperial Mali

After his victory at Kirina, Mansa Sundiata established his capital at Niani, near the present-day Malian border with Guinea.[45] Assisted by his generals, Tiramakhan being one of the most prominent, he went on to conquer other states. The lands of the old Ghana Empire were conquered. The king of Jolof was defeated by Tiramakhan and his kingdom reduced to a vassal state. After defeating the former ally of Soumaoro, Tiramakhan ventured deep into present-day Senegal, the Gambia and Guinea Bissau and conquered them. Tiramakhan was responsible for the conquest of the Senegambia.[46] In Kaabu (part of present-day Guinea Bissau), he defeated the last great Bainuk king (King Kikikor) and annexed his state. The great Kikikor was killed and his kingdom was renamed Kaabu.[47][48] Sundiata was responsible for the conquest of Diafunu and Kita.[46] Although the conquered states were answerable to the Mansa (*king*) of Mali, Sundiata was not an absolute monarch despite what the title implies. Though he probably wielded popular authority, the Mali Empire was reportedly run like a federation with each tribe having a chief representative at the court.[49] The first tribes were Mandinka clans of Traore, Kamara, Koroma, Konde (or *Conde*), and of course Keita. The Great Gbara Assembly was in charge of checking the Mansa's power, enforcing his edicts among their people, and selecting the successor (usually the Mansa's son, brother or sister's son).[50] The Empire flourished from the 13th to the late 14th century[11] but began to decline as some vassal states threw away the yoke of Mali and regained their independence. Some of these former vassals went on to form empires of their own.[51]

By the 14th century, the Mali Empire "extended from the Atlantic Ocean eastward along the Niger River valley to Hausaland (northern Nigeria)..."[44]

Death

Mansa Sundiata Keita died in c. 1255. This is generally the accepted year of death.[5][52] There is however very little information regarding his cause of death. Not only are there different versions, mainly modern, but Mandinka tradition forbids disclosing the burial ground of their great kings.[53][54] According to some, he died of drowning while trying to cross the Sankarani River, near Niani.[53][55] If one is to believe Delafosse, he was "accidentally killed by an arrow during a ceremony."[56] Others have maintained that, he was assassinated at a public demonstration.[55] At present, the generally accepted cause of death is drowning in the Sankarani

River, where a shrine that bears his name still remains today (*Sundiata-dun* meaning *Sundiata's deep water*).[53] His three sons (Mansa Wali Keita, Mansa Ouati Keita and Mansa Khalifa Keita) went on to succeed him as Mansas of the Empire. The famous West African and ostentatious[57] ruler Mansa Musa was his great-nephew.[9]

Legacy

A strong army was a major contributor to the success of Imperial Mali during the reign of Mansa Sundiata Keita.[46] Credit to Mali's conquests cannot all be attributed to Sundiata Keita but equally shared among his generals, and in this, Tiramakhan Traore stood out as one of the elite generals and warlords of Sundiata's Imperial Mali.[46] However, in a wider perspective of 13th century West African military history, Sundiata stood out as a great leader who was able to command the loyalties of his generals and army.[46][58]

It was during his reign that Mali first began to become an economic power, a trend continued by his successors an improved on thanks to the ground work set by Sundiata, who controlled the region's trade routes and gold fields.[45] The social and political constitution of Mali were first being codified during the reign of Mansa Sundiata Keita. Known as the Gbara and the Kouroukan Fouga, although not written and even subject to alterations in retelling and when they were first recorded in written form, they were part of the social and political norms of Mali. Many of these laws have been incorporated into the constitution of modern-day Mali.[49]

Sundiata Keita was not merely a conqueror who was able to rule over a large empire with different tribes and languages, but also developed Mali's mechanisms for agriculture, and is reported to have introduced cotton and weaving in Mali.[60] Towards the end of his reign, "absolute security" is reported to have "prevailed throughout his dominion".[60]

> "By unifying the military force of 12 states, Sundiata becomes an emperor known as the Lion King of Mali, who controls tribes from the Niger River west to the Atlantic Ocean. Walt Disney Studios reprised the story of Sundiata in 1994 as an animated film, *The Lion King*, with animals substituting for the humans of Mali legend."
>
> Ellen Snodgrass[59]

From a global perspective, the Epic of Sundiata and the Mali Empire is taught in many schools, colleges and universities, not just in West Africa but in many parts of the World.[12][61][62] Some scholars such as Ellen Snodgrass, and others have observed similarities with the 13th-century Epic of Sundiata to Walt Disney's 1994 animated film *The Lion King*.[59] Disney has maintained that the film was inspired by William Shakespeare's Hamlet.[63]

1995 Burkinabe movie *Keïta! l'Héritage du griot* tells the legend of Sundiata Keita.[64]

See also

The empire

- Mali Empire

The dynasty

- Keita Dynasty

The battle and warlords

- Battle of Kirina
- Tiramakhan Traore
- Soumaoro Kante

The people

- Mandinka people
- Sosso people

The region

- West Africa

Present-day countries

- History of Mali
- History of Senegal
- History of the Gambia
- History of Guinea-Bissau
- Guinea Conakry

The griot

- Balla Fasséké

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18. A Grammar of the Mandingo Language: With Vocabularies (https://books.google.com/books?id=CiJKAAAAcAAJ&pg=PA5&lpg=PA5&dq=mansa+in+Mandingo&source=bl&ots=YbnKy4vMUO&sig=ovBrf330WGGtH3gaBT8kHCFSF4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjf3cGKir7JAhXIORoKHXWDmM4ChDoAQgbMAA#v=onepage&q=mansa%20in%20Mandingo&f=false), by Robert Maxwell Macbrair, London 1873, p. 5.
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External links

- Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali, by D.T. Niane (Trans. G.D. Pickett)
- African Legends
- webMande. The Mande Peoples, History and Civilization (mostly in French)
- Outline of the Sundiata epic by Janice Siegel
- Parallels between The Sundiata Epic and The Lord of The Rings
- The True Lion King of Africa: The Epic History of Sundiata, King of Old Mali
- Background information on Sundiata. Sections include Geography, Religion, Society & Politics
- History of Mali. With reference to Sundiata and his successors.

Preceded by **none**	**Mansa of the Mali Empire** 1230–1255	Succeeded by **Wali Keita**

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